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# FAITH AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

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BY

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EXAMINING CHAPLAIN TO THE BISHOP OF SOUTHWELL  
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## PREFACE



THESE chapters were originally delivered as lectures to the Nottingham branch of the Church Reading Society. They are intended, not for the systematic student, but for the general reader interested in the study of the New Testament, who wishes, without being involved in the elaborate discussion of minutiae of scholarship, to acquaint himself with the main facts and conclusions, as modern Biblical scholarship presents them, and to face honestly the main problems arising out of their consideration. The purpose of this volume therefore explains the fact that many topics of interest are summarily treated, and much discussion of details is omitted. I can only hope that this sacrifice has resulted in bringing out

more clearly the main line of treatment and the points of chief importance.

I have naturally made much use of the works of the great leaders of New Testament scholarship; all students of the New Testament must perforce sit at their feet. But to Dr. Sanday I owe a personal debt of special gratitude for his kindness in reading through these chapters in MS., for much encouragement and many valuable suggestions.

A. W. F. BLUNT.

*February 1912.*

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CHAPTER I.  
THE PROBLEM.



## CHAPTER I.

### THE PROBLEM.

CHRISTIAN faith must be essentially a personal relation to God. No amount of deference to external authority can by itself make a man a Christian. Faith cannot be merely intellectual; it must be the act of a man's whole nature, will and reason and feelings. But, just because it is such, it must contain an intellectual element. A belief which is held without any regard for historical truth or rational probability is very little, if at all, better than a superstition. It may be comforting, even inspiring; it may win over the feelings and engage the support of the will; but, so long as it cannot be supported on rational grounds, it has not conquered the allegiance of the whole nature of man. The believer has simply allowed himself to be swayed into irrational action with regard to his religious faith; and such an attitude is responsible for much of the fanaticism



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and most of the obscurantism which have so often defaced the history of religious bodies.

Some modern schools of religious and philosophical thought deliberately accept the position that religion has nothing, as such, to do with the intellect. They draw a distinction between truths of faith and truths of fact, and assert that a religious creed is performing all its necessary functions, if it corresponds to the practical needs of the human spirit and to the individual witness of inner experience; to inquire whether its statements are true as facts is quite superfluous, as our views on that point need not affect the estimate which we make of their value for faith. We may still find comfort and inspiration in believing them, even though we do not believe them to be, in the normal sense of the word, true. It would take us too long here to discuss fully the bearings of this theory;<sup>1</sup> no doubt it may be applied with profit to allegorical stories, the value of which depends less upon their historical truth than upon the moral or spiritual lesson which they convey; and, at a higher level, it can also be invoked to justify the belief in those deeper

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of the point, see Inge's *Bampton Lectures*, pp. 325 ff.

propositions of theological doctrine, which are by their own nature incapable of demonstrative proof, because they make assertions as to facts which, if true, necessarily rise above all categories of the mere human intellect. But, considered as a complete account of the nature of religious belief, this theory fails, in the first place, to allow for the fact that ultimately there can be no satisfaction of spiritual needs which does not include the satisfaction of the reason's demand for rationality; and, in the second place, the theory fails, from the Christian point of view, to allow for the fact that Christianity claims to be a religion with an historical basis in an historic revelation, and that, therefore, the practical value and spiritual helpfulness which Christians find in their Creed is, in large measure, due to the circumstance that they believe the Creed to be based on historic facts, which are true as facts. If we are content to base our Christian faith merely upon its ethical and spiritual effects, and care nothing as to the truthfulness or reasonableness of the statements of our Creed, we shall expose ourselves with justice to the suspicion that we do so, because we think those statements to be historically dubious or rationally indefensible. And, when once we have allowed

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the suspicion that our Creed is untrue or irrational to become inveterate, we need not think that the belief in its ethical or spiritual value will long survive.

It is a favourite argument with apologists, that if Christianity were false, it would not have regenerated the world. And, **The** "effects" of **Christi-** **an-** **ity.** within a restricted compass, the argument is perfectly fair and logical, though its strength will obviously vary for us, according to our opinion of the "success" of Christianity. If we believe in a serious Providence, we are quite justified in believing that vital factors in the world's progress must have a basis in reality; and, if Christianity seems to us to be such a vital factor, we have a right to claim that it must be of God. A similar claim on similar grounds might be made for most, probably indeed for all, other religions. But, apart from this consideration, it may be doubted whether an argument from the effects of Christianity in the history of the world will at present do more than increase the conviction of those already convinced. For in the first place, revealed Christianity is still a young religion, and the annals of human credulity prove that the human mind can for a very long time

find help and support in what has eventually to be discarded as an imposture or, at best, an imperfect statement of the truth. An opponent might conceivably argue that Christianity may even yet have to be laid aside in the limbo of outworn creeds, which pleased and served the world in their generation, until the illumination of fresh knowledge revealed their inadequacy. And in the second place, there does not at present seem to be any very general agreement in the world as to the value and success of Christianity as a revealed religion. The world is a big place, and only a small proportion of its inhabitants is as yet even nominally Christian. We may choose to say that what seems to us to be the most progressive and advanced section of the world has become what it is under the influence of Christianity; yet there will not be wanting many who will challenge our whole notion of progress, or declare that, if an upward movement ever existed, it has by now given place to a definite decline, and that the civilisation of Christendom is destined to travel the same road as many other historical civilisations. These contentions, whether true or not, are at least strong enough and held widely enough to make us question whether the

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argument from the effects of Christianity is so convincing as perhaps we imagined it to be. But in any case we cannot be exempt from the necessity of trying to commend our faith on grounds of truth as well as of value. We ought to wish, if not to satisfy others, at least to satisfy ourselves that our faith can claim the activity of our reason as well as of our feelings. We ought to want to know, if we can, that we believe, not only something which is good, but also something which is true and reasonable. And in order to supply that want, we must be ready to consider, as impartially as possible, both the historical evidence for Christianity, and the philosophic grounds upon which it can be shown to be rational. The latter subject does not come at all within the purview of these chapters. We are here concerned solely with the historical testimony to the Christian tradition, which rests upon the Church and the New Testament. Our task is to consider the authority of these two witnesses, and their relation to one another. It will therefore be necessary to discuss the process by which the New Testament reached its present form, and the bearing of that process upon the question of the Divine inspiration of the books, and to

attempt some consideration of the proportionate weight to be attached to the respective authorities of Church and Bible. These will be the topics of subsequent chapters. But it may help to set the problem in a clearer light and to give us at the outset a better idea of the questions involved, if, before proceeding to this more particular analysis, we begin with an outline and criticism of some views very widely current amongst us with regard to the Church and the Bible, views which influence consciously or unconsciously the minds of a great many in their attitude towards the Christian faith.

The theory to which probably most of us were brought up may be described as the theory of an infallible Bible; or let us say, in order to avoid complicating the subject by introducing the question of the Old Testament, the theory of an infallible New Testament. This theory was, of course, not held by everybody in the same form, but the general view of ordinary people was somewhat as follows: (1) All the books were written at about the same time, and from the very first were the recognised authoritative documents of the Christian Church; the New Testament was regarded as

prior in importance to the Church, and the inference latent in most minds was that it was prior in time also, that from the very beginning the Church had the New Testament to follow, and followed it. (2) All the books were written quite freely by their authors, without any consultation of sources, without any use of the means which other writers have to employ; the authors were the mere amanuenses of the Holy Spirit; they could not have written a word more or a word less than they did; and we possess the writings exactly in the form in which they were originally written. (3) It followed therefore that the New Testament was the direct utterance of the Holy Spirit; every word of it was equally true, equally valuable, equally infallible. This was no new idea,<sup>1</sup> but it had never previously been worked out with such remorseless completeness and uncompromising logic as it was in the era of modern Protestantism. Medieval Catholicism, if it held the theory of verbal inspiration, at least saved itself many a trouble by allowing the disregard of the literal sense of inconvenient passages in

<sup>1</sup> "Both Irenæus and Tertullian regard inspiration as determining the choice of particular words and phrases." Sanday, *Inspiration*, p. 34, and the whole section.



favour of some allegorical explanation. But the Reformation writers insisted that Holy Scripture was always to be taken in its literal sense, whilst they retained the theory of verbal inspiration. And, although Luther and Calvin were so far inconsistent with their own theories as to value some books of the New Testament more highly than others, their successors were more logical and at the same time much more wooden in their expositions of Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

This view has been irretrievably damaged by the modern critical movement. The ad-

**Modern** mission may be unpleasant to make,  
**Biblical** but it is of no use to try to suppress  
**Criticism.** truth in the interests of prejudice ; we may take to heart the warning of Erasmus, "by identifying new learning with heresy you make orthodoxy synonymous with ignorance." No doubt critics are not always in agreement as to results ; no doubt also many results which are at present generally accepted may in time have to be modified or even discarded ; it is valuable to be warned against accepting all critical results as final. But,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Inge, *Faith and its Psychology*, cap. vii. p. 115, a chapter to which the discussion in this section is largely indebted.

whatever may be the fate of particular conclusions, the general result of the movement upon the theory of verbal inspiration is undeniable. We have learnt too much about the dates and authenticity and sources of the various books of the New Testament, and about the development of the Christian literature, to be able to hold the old view of the way in which they were written without flying in the face of historical facts. We have learnt too much about the disagreements and contradictions that exist in various parts of the New Testament, to be able to hold the old view of their verbal infallibility without landing ourselves in hopeless difficulties of exegesis. The process of revising our views in this matter is painful, but it will have to be gone through; and in the long run it will result in pure gain on every side. The old doctrine of verbal inspiration has been productive of an enormous amount of difficulty and harm to the Christian Church; people have been compelled, in the interests of this doctrine, to resort to strained and fantastic explanations of passages in order to get out of difficulties, explanations which convince very few and offend very many, who see Biblical texts treated in a way which would be scouted as

dishonest if followed in the interpretation of any other book. The doctrine is based upon a mistaken conception of the growth of the Christian Church and its literature. And indeed the belief in an infallible Book (or, for that matter, in any infallible authority) means, as Dr. Inge reminds us,<sup>1</sup> the arrest of faith. Faith must be active, progressive, dynamic; and an infallible authority makes all these characteristics impossible, because it makes them superfluous. No doubt faith is an easier thing for those who have an infallible guide to appeal to in matters of doubt. But a faith which is easy is a faith which is not inspiring.<sup>2</sup> An infallible guide is a short cut to faith, and therefore makes the soul lazy. And it may be doubted whether a large part of the tremendous gain of an open Bible, which the Reformation gave us, has not been counter-balanced by the fact that Protestantism shut down, or tended to shut down, all free and scientific study of the Bible by treating it as a verbal oracle, which it was sacrilegious

<sup>1</sup> Inge, *Faith and its Psychology*, p. 121. "An infallible oracle would destroy the possibility of Faith, or at least would finally arrest its growth at the point where the revelation was made."

<sup>2</sup> I say "easy," I do not say "simple." A faith cannot perhaps be too simple; but the simplest faith is precisely the one to which it is often most difficult to attain.

to question, and which must be accepted as an infallible whole, titles, stops, and Archbishop Ussher's chronology all included. This saved people from very much trouble for a long time; but it thereby petrified their capacities for faith, and the result is enhanced trouble now, when the infallibility of the oracle has begun to be doubted, and faith which had never been taught to act for itself is deprived of its leading-strings.<sup>1</sup>

The process of transition is, of course, a process of unrest; and the result of all this demolition of old fences is that many think the only alternative for them is to wander unshepherded. They have the notion that the New Testament (to say nothing of the Old Testament) is wholly discredited. If they do not go so far as to believe, with a certain

<sup>1</sup> One of the dominant needs of present religious life in England is that the Evangelical party should consent to reconsider their dislike of modern Biblical scholarship and their predilection—I speak of the rank and file more than of the leaders—for sneering and girding at “the critics” as if they were the *ne plus ultra* of infidelity. This party stands for such noble ideals and such a precious aspect of truth, especially precious in view of the current perversions and exaggerations of its other aspects, that it is melancholy to see how these ideals and this presentation fail to have the full influence which might and ought to be theirs, because they are accidentally combined with an exploded theory of inspiration.

voluble controversialist whom once I met, that the whole New Testament is a fiction written about the year 300 A.D. to make us good, at least they point out that, if there are errors and contradictions in the New Testament, there is no saying how far these may not extend. Critics themselves differ on many points ; and where are we to find an authority to guarantee to us what is authentic in the Bible ?

The answer which Roman Catholics, and probably others also, would give, is that the Church provides the infallible authority needed. The Roman Catholics, with the utter logic and the utter lack of regard for obvious facts which is so characteristic of their system, find that authority summed up for them and expressed in the pronouncements of the Head of the Church, *i.e.* the Pope. Others who reject papal infallibility would yet maintain that in the consentient voice of Catholic Christendom may be found the authoritative guide required to satisfy the human desire for certainty. The Church, they say, is the living embodiment of a continuous tradition which goes back behind the New Testament ; and in saying so, they are saying nothing but

the literal truth, as will be shown in a later chapter. But the statement does not advance us very far. For we are soon brought to the choice between two views—firstly, that the tradition is one of a revelation once given to the Church and never to be altered or developed; secondly, that the tradition is capable of development. And, before we can pass on, these views must be severally considered.

The first view sets us at once face to face with the question, what is that final deposit of faith which was once for all given to the Church's keeping? There is no question that there was development of doctrine, of custom, and of organisation in the early Church; and if so, where are we to fix the limit and to say that at such and such a point the original deposit is completed? Not long ago we were urged by counsellors of authority to fix this limit at the end of the sixth century. But the advice, however well meant, fell on deaf ears; the limit was indeed too purely arbitrary, and the idea of a time-limitation for essential development was too pedantic to find much favour. But, if we cannot agree on such a time-limit, how can we agree as to the unalterable deposit of faith?

**A Fixed Tradition.**

If there is not universal agreement as to the nucleus of the faith, *viz.*, the Creed, there is widespread disagreement as to its circumference. On such questions as Episcopacy, Papacy, Sacramental doctrine, even as to what constitutes the Church itself, there is nothing approaching to Catholic agreement;<sup>1</sup> and the voice of the early Church is by no means unanimous or decided upon such points.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, if the doctrine of a fixed deposit of faith is practically impossible, it seems also to be theoretically unspiritual. We believe the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Church; we believe that the Holy Spirit is still guiding us into all truth, and that the Church has still new treasures to bring out of His treasury; in other words, we believe that the Christian faith is a body of constantly growing truth, and that God is still revealing

<sup>1</sup>And this is true, whether we use the adjective in a partisan, a sectarian, or its proper sense.

<sup>2</sup>If it is a matter of verbal quotations, Church Fathers can be quoted, by any one who knows them, and has a moderate power of selection, to support almost every theory. Their language—especially that of the earlier writers—was often quite vague and untechnical; and many of them would have been astounded and often horrified, if they had known what a mountain of superstructure would be raised on the basis of phrases which they used casually and without regard for exactly scientific precision of terms.



Himself in ever new light to the world. And such a doctrine is incompatible with the theory of a fixed revelation. That theory is static, *i.e.* it assumes that a revelation was at some past time given to mankind, but that the conditions of guidance into new truth have ceased to exist. On the other hand, if the Holy Spirit is anything at all, He is a power, and His influence must therefore be dynamic. He must still have much to teach us, as we become capable of receiving it; and therefore the deposit of faith cannot be fixed, but must always be capable of addition, as well as reinterpretation, under the Spirit's guidance.

If then the Church's tradition is not fixed and unalterable, it must be capable of development. This is the theory upon which, whether consciously or unconsciously, all branches of the Church act. The Roman Catholics do not, I suppose, argue that the dogmas of papal infallibility or the immaculate conception were among the truths once delivered to the Church, and were publicly produced out of a secret storehouse of Apostolic doctrine, when the time seemed ripe. They treat them as developments of the original tradition,

guaranteed and made binding upon believers by the voice of the Church, as represented by the Pope. They find the guarantee for the infallibility of this developing church tradition in the continuous inspiration of the Pope. The theory is in appearance logical enough; its chief weakness is that it is untrue. There is no reason for feeling confident that the Pope's claim to autocratic jurisdiction has any sanction in history or in revelation; and there is abundant reason for feeling confident that the Holy Spirit does not speak only through the mouth of the Bishop of Rome, nor always through his mouth. But, without arguing the controversial issue, it is enough for our present purpose to point out that the theory of the Pope's infallibility is itself in need of a guarantee. No voice from the heavens has ever decreed it; no word of Scripture can be cited to support it,<sup>1</sup> and at present the only guarantees for this theory which can be suggested to us are that of the Pope himself, that of private judgment, and that of Catholic acceptance. In other words, either I must believe that the Pope is infallible,

<sup>1</sup> Even if the commission to St. Peter be perverted to support the Pope's claim to temporal power, it says nothing as to his theological infallibility.

because he says so ; and it is proverbially unsatisfactory to make a man a judge in his own cause. Or I must believe it, because I think so ; but what if I do not ? And how can I be sure that I am right ? If I can be sure, then I am infallible and do not need the Pope. Or I must believe it, because the Catholic Church says so ; but many people claim to be Catholics and yet deny the infallibility of the Pope ; and if it be rejoined that they are not Catholics, I ask who is to decide this ? and my only answer is a reference once more to the Pope. In short, Catholic unanimity as to the Pope's infallibility is reached by denying the name of Catholic to all who deny his infallibility. And, apart from this, the argument would still run in a vicious circle ; the Church is infallible, because the Pope is infallible ; the Pope is infallible, because the Church agrees that he is. By this time, if we have any wits left to us after threading this tortuous maze of question-begging, we can see that any theory of Church infallibility which hears the voice of the Church in that of the Pope is on precarious ground, and can scarcely give us much confidence in developments of tradition which are only so guaranteed.

And if for the Pope we substitute the consensus of Catholic Christendom as our guarantee, where are we to find such a consensus? Certainly nowhere at the present time, when Christendom is a mass of fragments, and "Catholic" is degraded and vulgarised into a party badge. Nor anywhere in the past, for such consensus would only guarantee developments up to the time when Catholic unity ceased to exist; we should be reverting unconsciously to the discarded theory of a fixed tradition. Indeed I do not think that, outside the Roman Church, there is any section of Christian believers which dreams that we can at present find anywhere an infallible authority for Church tradition. I do not know whether any suppose that, if Christendom could be reunited, the Church would once more be infallible. At any rate, the contingency required is unfortunately very remote. But if, as the 21st Article says, "General Councils may err and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God," it seems a logical inference that they might do so again. And, moreover, it is open to serious question whether man is ever intended to enjoy the guidance of any infallible authority among mankind. The craving

for such a guide is natural enough, but can we really think that this craving is intended to be satisfied under human conditions? Our faith must be a personal venture; and there is no venture where we can refer to such an authority as will preclude all chance of mistake.<sup>1</sup> We see here through a glass darkly, and shall not reach certainty until we see face to face. But, whatever may be our views on this point, at any rate we cannot reasonably deny that at present no such infallible guide can be found. Neither the New Testament nor the Church supplies the need. We may test the witness of the one by that of the other, but in each separately there is the possibility of error, and there may therefore be error even in points where their witness agree.

At present I am concerned to point out the difficulty, not to make any attempt to solve it. I shall hope in subsequent chapters to give some indication of the degree in which the New Testament and the Church may be regarded as credible witnesses; but the first requisite is

<sup>1</sup> There may be the initial venture of accepting the authority as infallible. But thereafter faith is safe from all possibility of risk. This is an inhuman anticlimax.

to realise that in neither of them can we expect to find testimony which can be accepted as in all points infallible. And the question must therefore arise, in what sense do we call the New Testament and the Church inspired, and what value are we to attach to their evidence? This question can only be answered after an examination of the process by which the New Testament reached its present form. But this much at least may be said in anticipation of that answer, that we shall have to reconsider our whole view of the nature of inspiration. Divine inspiration has generally been taken in popular opinion to involve absolute infallibility; and a denial of the infallibility whether of Bible or of Church has been treated as an attack on their inspiration. But the truth is that inspiration simply means the operation of the Holy Spirit within us; and, for that operation to produce infallibility, it is necessary that our inmost personality should correspond and co-operate perfectly with the Divine stimulus. There is but one Man, we believe, in whom such a correspondence was permanently established; ours can only be partial, and therefore there must be the possibility of error or of partial misunderstanding of the Spirit's teaching in

all works of humanity, however highly inspired they may be, so long as they fall short of the degree reached by Jesus Christ. This applies to the processes by which the authors of the New Testament wrote their books; it applies to those who in any age read those books; it applies to the Church which interprets those books. In all alike there may be error. Thus it is and must be our duty to try to discover how and how far we can sift error and half-truth from truth. It is no easy task, and no single man can do it perfectly. But we may repeat that faith is not meant to be easy, nor can it hope to be perfectly enlightened until faith is lost in sight. Faith is a grace, and in it, as in other graces, we can only expect to grow gradually; and even a lifetime of growth will not make our faith perfect. But that is no excuse for arresting the growth at such a point as our laziness finds convenient. Our faith has to go on learning, if it is to go on living.



CHAPTER II.  
THE SETTLEMENT OF  
TRADITION.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE SETTLEMENT OF TRADITION.

CHRIST Himself wrote nothing; He never ordered any record of His life or any notes of His teaching to be kept; He left no formulated programme for His disciples to follow. His method of working was by the influence of personal magnetism, by the "contagion of personality." And the earliest generation of Christians would be in no need of written words or records. The tradition of Christ's sayings and doings was still fresh in living memory. There were many besides the eleven who had "companied with them all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning from the baptism of John unto that same day that He was taken up from them,"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Acts i. 21, 22. I have seen it somewhere suggested that there were only two such men, *viz.*, Joseph Barsabas and Matthias. This view seems to me to be purely arbitrary, and to run counter to the whole tenour of the narrative of the election of Matthias. In any case, it is reasonable to infer

and it was from these that one had to be chosen to take the place of Judas Iscariot. Thus in the earliest days there would be so many who could give fairly continuous accounts of our Lord's ministry, that the need of written records would not be felt. It must also be remembered that the early Christians in general lived in eager expectation of an immediate return of Christ to consummate His work;<sup>1</sup> to people in such a frame of mind any written books about Christ would seem wholly superfluous. Nor, apparently, did the work of Christian missionaries at first require written documents. The earliest Christian evangelisation was done by word of mouth. The missionary declared that which he had received, whether from his own personal experience of Jesus Christ or from the evidence of Christ's personal friends. St. Paul in his epistles<sup>2</sup> never refers to any Christian writings ;

that our Lord's work may have been proceeding for some time before He came to John the Baptist.

<sup>1</sup> St. Paul's language proves beyond doubt not only that this was his own view, but that it was the common view of the early Christian Church.

<sup>2</sup> Some have supposed that fragments of early Christian hymns may be found, *e.g.* in Rom. xiii. 11, 12 ; Eph. v. 14 ; 1 Tim. iii. 16 ; 2 Tim. ii. 11-13. But such passages, and the use of liturgical formulæ, do not ever reach to definite quotation of Christian books as Holy Writ.

the sacred books of the first generation of Christians were the books of the Old Testament, and those books alone. The motto of the earliest Christian preachers was simply "that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you."

Gradually, however, a Christian literature was bound to arise ; and this must have taken place mainly in two ways. (1) As **First beginnings of Christian Literature.** churches sprung up in various places, communication between them or between a church and its founder or one of the Christian leaders would naturally be established. The earliest kind of Christian literature is therefore in the form of epistles to churches. St. Paul wrote his first series of epistles at dates between 48 and 60 A.D.<sup>1</sup> and the type thus set was followed by others. (2) Through various writers and for various purposes the words and deeds of Jesus would be put into writing, as the writers remembered them or had heard them from the evidence of others. There would probably be no system in this process at the first ; one might write down a parable

<sup>1</sup> I believe also that the Epistle of St. James comes from an even earlier period (see *Interpreter*, January 1909), though some would put it at ■ considerably later date.

or group of parables which had impressed him, another might record a striking miracle, another perhaps a notable saying; some might try to write more continuous narratives, whether as manuals for the guidance of preachers or for some less official purpose. The more extensive and important of such records would probably not be at all numerous; and if we wish to conjecture what they would be likely to contain, we shall not, I imagine, refuse our assent to Prof. Stanton's statement of the probabilities of the case.<sup>1</sup> He points out that the earliest Christian teaching in Jerusalem would be largely based on quotations from our Lord's teaching. It would not say much about His personal doings, for the Jews in Jerusalem would already know of the most important events in His life. Thus any records which came into being for their use would be mainly records of His words;<sup>2</sup> and these would be written either in Hebrew or

<sup>1</sup> In *The Gospels as Historical Documents*, vol. ii. cap. ii., *ad init.*

<sup>2</sup> In modern times it would be very difficult to preserve orally for long the character of anybody's words. But among the Jews, with their habit of teaching by oral repetition in identical verbal form (*cf.* the Talmud), it would be a less unlikely achievement. And, as a matter of fact, the amount of variation in the Gospels is much less in the case of "sayings" than in simple narrative.

in Aramaic, the vernacular language of Palestine. On the other hand the Greek Christians, whether of Jewish or heathen origin, would need both a record of Christ's teaching and an account of his life; both would be equally new to them. But here they would be handicapped by the fact that Christ's teaching was originally delivered in Aramaic, for which reason a Greek record of it would not be likely to arise until the tradition had been written down in Aramaic and could be translated or used by a writer in Greek. On the other hand, a Greek record of Christ's deeds could come into being at once. It is in keeping with this theory that there is scarcely any direct quotation of Christ's words in St. Paul's epistles, written to Greek-speaking Christians, though he uses the Old Testament freely, as well known to his converts.<sup>1</sup> But, whatever we may suppose the character of the earliest Christian records of Christ's life to have been, certainly it cannot have been very long before

<sup>1</sup> The only passages in his epistles which can be supposed to be quotations from words of Christ are those passages in which he says definitely that the instructions which he is giving are the Lord's (*e.g.* 1 Cor. vii. 10); and I am very doubtful whether it is a necessary inference from such a phrase that he is quoting from any written and known records of Christ's teaching.

some sort of Christian books would arise ; the oral tradition would be too fluid and dependent on too few authorities to be available widely enough, as the number of Christian Churches grew and the Christian society struck roots in more numerous places. And we can fairly assume that by about 60-70 A.D. there would be some—not necessarily nor probably many—records of Christ's life ; some would be in Aramaic, and we may, if we choose, suppose these to have been mainly records of His sayings ; others would be in Greek and might be mainly accounts of His doings.

This theory is in accord with such external evidence as we possess. The first piece of evidence is that of St. Luke i. 1-2.

**External Evidence.** "Many have taken in hand to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the word." This bears witness (a) to the general fact that many before St. Luke had written accounts of Christ's life based upon the evidence of eye-witnesses and Christian teachers ; (b) that St. Luke himself knew and therefore probably used these written documents, though apparently he had also



other sources of information. The next piece of evidence comes in a quotation of Eusebius<sup>1</sup> from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the beginning of the second century (born probably about 80 A.D.), who professes to be giving information derived from a presbyter called John, who must have flourished about the year 100. "And this the presbyter used to say : Mark, becoming the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, yet not in order, whatsoever he mentioned of the things said or done by the Lord. For he did not hear the Lord nor was he a disciple of His, but afterwards, as I said, of Peter, who used to give the lessons as they were needed, but not as if he were making an ordered collection of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark made no mistake in thus writing down some things as he related them from memory. For he took care of one thing, to leave nothing out of what he heard nor to falsify anything in it." And as to Matthew he says, "Matthew then composed the oracles in the Hebrew dialect, and each one interpreted them as he was able." This passage is of extraordinary interest and importance, and there is no reason for doubting that it contains truth. It shows us (1) that

<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, iii. 39.

St. Mark's Gospel arose as a record of St. Peter's preaching, and that St. Mark was what we may call St. Peter's Greek private secretary. The gospel, therefore, was probably written in Greek for Greeks; and in connection with the theory above outlined it is worth noting that there is comparatively very little record of Christ's teaching in St. Mark. (2) That St. Matthew wrote "the oracles" in Hebrew or Aramaic, and that these were translated by various people as they could. This statement can hardly refer to written translations, for, as Professor Stanton points out,<sup>1</sup> if one complete written translation was in circulation, it would naturally be felt that the further efforts of individuals were unnecessary. The words therefore probably mean that such Christians as knew both Hebrew and Greek translated portions orally from the work of St. Matthew, especially at the meetings of the Christian assembly; though of course some pieces of translation may have been written down and preserved.

If now we ask how this evidence bears upon the Gospels which we possess, we are at once brought face to face with "the Synoptic problem," *i.e.* the problem of the mutual re-

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* vol. i. p. 55.

lations of our first three Gospels. The discussion of this problem by scholars has not yet reached universal agreement upon

**The Synoptic Problem.** all details, but it has at least arrived at certain general results, which the considerable majority of scholars are at one in accepting. To give the evidence upon which these conclusions are based would be a very long task and wearisome to any but a professed scholar; but the conclusions in themselves are such as any one can understand. They are as follows: (1) That our Gospel of St. Mark is substantially that which Papias mentions, and that it arose from the writing down of oral tradition, though it is possible that the gospel as we have it contains additions made later by other hands to the original work of St. Mark; (2) that our Gospel of St. Matthew is certainly not the original work of St. Matthew, of which Papias speaks, for our gospel seems undoubtedly not to be a translation from a Hebrew original, but a work in Greek based on Greek sources; nor can it fairly be called merely a record of "the oracles." It seems, indeed, very unlikely that our first gospel, as it stands, can be the work of St. Matthew, though it may be based upon a work of St. Matthew's composition; (3) that our Gospel

of St. Luke is by St. Luke and is undoubtedly based upon other documents; (4) that our Gospel of St. John, whoever its author may have been (this is a point upon which no measure of agreement has yet been reached), was the latest of the four; (5) that our Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke are based upon two main sources—(a) the Gospel of St. Mark, though possibly not quite in the form in which we possess it, and (b) a source to which is given the name of Q,<sup>1</sup> consisting mainly of records of Christ's teaching; this is possibly the document of which Papias speaks as written by St. Matthew. These two sources account for nearly all that is in our present Gospel of St. Matthew, and for most of what is in our Gospel of St. Luke, though it is likely that St. Luke used other sources as well, and added items from his own knowledge of tradition

<sup>1</sup> Q is the first letter of the German word *Quelle*, which means "source." The title is therefore absolutely non-committal as to its authorship. Some call it the "Logia-document," thus identifying it with the record mentioned by Papias. But it is better not to be too dogmatic and positive in this identification, as we do not yet know anything as to the nature of these "Logia" or "oracles"; e.g. some suppose them to have been a collection of Messianic passages from the Old Testament. But, whether it was St. Matthew's work or not, some document consisting mainly of records of Christ's teaching must have existed.

about Christ, especially on the subject of His infancy.

The process, therefore, by which a literature dealing with Christ's life arose must have been

**Summary.**  
**First signs**  
**of "Holy**  
**Writ."**
 somewhat as follows: As the oral tradition began to lose its first freshness, and as the expectation of Christ's immediate return began to die down, and as the Church increased in numbers and extent (all these factors contributed to the result), the need of written documents began to be felt. This was partly supplied by epistles to churches; but those dealt mainly with points of church organisation and doctrine, *i.e.* with the interpretation, rather than the groundwork, of Christian belief. A chief need was of written records of Christ's life and teaching. "Many," as St. Luke tells us, set themselves to supply this need, in short or full narratives, writing down the oral tradition current in their society. Among such narratives those that gradually superseded the rest, because fuller or more authoritative, were (1) the Gospel of St. Mark in Greek, written perhaps about 60 A.D., perhaps earlier; (2) the document which we call Q, which may have been the work of St. Matthew, written perhaps in Hebrew or

Aramaic, but, if so, probably soon translated into Greek.<sup>1</sup> The date of this document is unknown. Professor Ramsay supposes it to have been written in Christ's own lifetime; but the general opinion would put it later, perhaps between 50 and 60 A.D. These two documents were used, at some date within the first century, by some compiler to form, perhaps with additions from other sources, our present Gospel of St. Matthew;<sup>2</sup> they were also used by St. Luke, perhaps between 70 and 80 A.D. or even earlier,<sup>3</sup> for his gospel, though he undoubtedly added elements from other sources. Finally, the Gospel of St. John was written last,

<sup>1</sup> In which case the Greek translation would inevitably supersede the original, as Greek was the general language of most of the Roman world.

<sup>2</sup> Though it is probable that some additions to and interpolations in the text of the gospel were made at later dates.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Harnack's striking work on *The Date of the Acts and Synoptic Gospels* shows that the tendency of the sanest scholarship is more and more to put the date of the composition of the first three gospels back to an earlier time than used to be considered probable. He there argues with great force that (1) St. Luke's Gospel and the Acts were written during St. Paul's lifetime, *i.e.* before 70 A.D.; (2) St. Mark's Gospel must be assigned at the latest to the sixth decade of the first century; (3) though St. Matthew's Gospel, in its present shape, should probably be assigned to the years immediately after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., yet composition before the catastrophe cannot be excluded with absolute certainty.

as a supplement to the other three. These four Gospels were probably all in existence, substantially as we have them, by the year 100, and also most or all of the epistles which we have in our New Testament. In places, too, they were beginning to be regarded as specially authoritative, to supersede oral evidence, and to set the standard for oral teaching. But that they were not yet generally treated as sacred and distinct from all other writings is certain. For, in the first place, we find that Christian writers of that time had no scruple in quoting from them without verbal accuracy, which would scarcely have been the case if they were regarded as sacred books. In the second place, there was still the possibility of obtaining genuine fragments of oral tradition from disciples of the earliest Christians.<sup>1</sup> In the third place, it is certain that other books now lost, or, if surviving, now excluded from the canon of the New Testament, were regarded and quoted as

<sup>1</sup> Thus Papias says (Euseb., *Hist. Eccl.* III. xxxix. 4): "If perchance any one came who had followed the teaching of the elders, I used to ask about the words of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what Aristion and John the elder, disciples of the Lord, say. For I did not suppose the statements in books to be of such use to me as those from a living and extant voice."

authoritative equally with the canonical books.<sup>1</sup> So far, then, the process by which the books of the New Testament came into a position apart from other books had only begun. The main result reached by the year 100 is really this, that the Christian Church had by then learnt in general to set its chief reliance for knowledge about Christ upon written documents, and not, as at first, upon oral evidence. It had begun to accept written books as giving the standard of truth, to which oral teaching and preaching must conform.

We must now consider the way in which the knowledge of these written documents was gradually spread in the beginning of the second century throughout the Christian world, and the process by which the authority of some among these documents was gradually accepted everywhere as primary, whilst others were placed in a subordinate position. We have seen that at present, though all the four Gospels and most, if not all, of the epistles now in the New Testament were probably in existence, yet there were other books which

<sup>1</sup> This we find in later writers also, *e.g.*, in Justin Martyr (*circ.* 150 A.D.), who sometimes combines statements culled from the canonical books with others which are derived from books outside our canon.



were also accepted here and there as authorities. We must also remember that all these books must have begun by having only a limited and quite local circulation. What we must inquire is, how the knowledge of them spread from one place to another in Christendom, and why some became widely or universally known and valued, while others continued to have only a local reputation or were relegated to a place of secondary importance.

Epistles were as a rule written only to one church or group of churches; and we may be

**Spread of Christian Documents.** quite certain that not a few epistles written by the leaders of the early Church have been irrecoverably lost;<sup>1</sup> as has been said, the earliest Christians did not feel the need of written documents, and all sorts of causes can be imagined which would make the loss of such letters easy and natural. But some at least must have been intended from the first to have something of a circulation.<sup>2</sup> And certainly, as time went

<sup>1</sup> e.g. A study of 1 and 2 Corinthians makes it plain that at least one epistle of St. Paul to Corinth has been lost.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Col. iv. 16. And Lightfoot conjectured Ephesians to have been a circular letter to Asiatic churches; and Professor Ramsay in his *Epistles to the Seven Churches* argues that the Apocalypse was a kind of circular letter sent round to the various districts of the Christian Church in Asia Minor.

on and the first generation of apostles passed away, there would be more anxiety to preserve their written words. A church which possessed an epistle from some leading apostle might be asked to send a copy of it to another church.<sup>1</sup> In this way the epistles would become more widely known; and it is obvious that a letter from one of the chief apostles would have a far better chance of being preserved and copied than those of lesser men.

The fate of records of Christ's life and teaching would be somewhat similar. These records were, of course, not addressed to any particular church; but they would originate in one and doubtless would be publicly read there. Some one would take a copy of such a record and carry it with him on his travels to some other place. And it is clear that those records which were written most fully or were ascribed to the highest authorities, or were read in the greatest and most influential churches, would be likely to be copied most often and to be received with greatest respect, wherever copies of them were carried.

<sup>1</sup> Thus Polycarp, in his Epistle to the Philippians (c. 13), says that with his own letter he is sending to them the letters that Ignatius had previously sent to Smyrna (of which Polycarp was bishop), and any others that his church possessed.

In some such ways as these, some books would become more widely known and be accepted as more authoritative than others. There was no sort of central body of selectors who approved some books and rejected others. The work of selection might be called haphazard, or might be called providential; but in fact it was the work of general Christian opinion, working slowly and gradually but none the less decidedly; but, of course, this public opinion was moulded and guided by the influence of individual leaders. It was, we may say, the Church itself which selected its own authoritative documents. Each book of the New Testament won its way to general acceptance mainly on its own merits as recognised by Christian opinion, which expressed itself (*a*) through those who copied one document more than others, (*b*) through those who carried about copies of one document rather than of others, (*c*) through those who received copies of one document with greater reverence than copies of others. And the general grounds upon which some books were approved as primary and others were placed in a secondary rank were in the main three or perhaps four.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sanday, *Bampton Lectures*, p. 47 ff.

(1) It was asked whether a book was apostolic, *i.e.* written or vouched for by an apostle. Thus St. Luke's Gospel was regarded as vouched for by St. Paul, since St. Luke had been one of his intimate companions. St. Mark's Gospel was vouched for by St. Peter, whose interpreter St. Mark had been. It was on the ground that it was not apostolic, that "the Shepherd" of Hermas, a book which had at one time been exceedingly popular, especially among Roman Christians, was eventually relegated to a subordinate position. It was on the same ground that the Epistle to the Hebrews was for a long time held in doubtful esteem, because it had not the guarantee of any great apostolic name.<sup>1</sup>

(2) It was asked whether a book corresponded with the traditional doctrine of the Church. Thus the Apocalypse was for long considered of questionable value, because it was supposed to sanction the extravagant views of Millenarians.<sup>2</sup>

(3) A book had a better chance if it was

<sup>1</sup> The idea that it was by St. Paul had not yet arisen, and seems in any case to be very dubious.

<sup>2</sup> *i.e.* People who held fantastic views as to the reign of the saints on earth for a thousand years.

publicly received and read in one of the greater churches. Thus the Epistle of St. James was for a considerable period almost unknown except in the comparatively obscure churches of Syria and Palestine.

(4) It has been suggested that the idea of sacred numbers influenced the exclusion of books which would have caused the number to exceed the sacred figure; *e.g.* Irenæus<sup>1</sup> says that there must be no more than four gospels, as there are four cardinal points of the compass. St. Paul must have written only to seven churches, as St. John did in the Revelation, says another writer;<sup>2</sup> the number seven is plainly taken as symbolical of universality. But it is clear that such considerations are only a piece of *ex post facto* symbolism; *i.e.* after the four gospels and seven epistles had won their special position, ingenious writers could take a delight in reading a symbolism into their number.

The position of affairs by about 170 A.D. is quite clear; it is a development from the position which we found existing by the year 100. By the later date the process of selec-

<sup>1</sup> *Adv. Hæc.* III. xi. 8.

<sup>2</sup> The author of the Muratorian Fragment. See next chapter.

tion has begun to be completed. The books of the New Testament, as we have them, are generally admitted as authoritative.

**Position by**  
**170 A.D.** They are not yet all equally well known; thus St. Mark's Gospel was less popular than St. Matthew's or St. Luke's, probably because it was shorter, and all that it contained seemed to be incorporated in the other two; and St. James' Epistle was for long little known outside Syria. Again, some books which are not in our New Testament had still a high reputation in some places. But in the main and in most places, the documents by this date recognised by Christians as authoritative are those books which are now in our New Testament. Some were read, we are told,<sup>1</sup> in the public services of the Christian Church, together with the writings of the prophets. We can scarcely even yet say that they were regarded as Holy Writ, but certainly we can see that they were on the way towards being so regarded; and they were at least the accepted standard of Christian truth and doctrine, with which no oral evidence could any longer compete.

The facts brought out by our investigation

<sup>1</sup> *e.g.* Justin Martyr tells us that the "memoirs of the apostles" were read at the Eucharistic service.

so far are as follows :—(1) That the Gospels are largely composite. The writers used sources like other writers, and compiled their records from oral and written tradition ; and, later, scribes made some additions to the text, according to their own knowledge ; (2) that the process by which the books of the New Testament were gradually selected from among other Christian books for a primary position was a slow process, the work of time and the gradual settling of opinion, under the guidance of individual leaders ; (3) that the books of the New Testament were selected for good and proper reasons, and come to us, as vouched for by the general consensus of the Christian Church, as the faithful records of Church tradition, *i.e.* of the truths which the Church had believed from the outset ; (4) that the process of selection is reaching its end by the year 170. By then the books of the New Testament, as we know them, are practically all generally known and generally esteemed as authoritative. A few local uses of other books still survive, and a few books which are now in the New Testament are still only locally known, but in the main the selection has been made. Our next task, therefore, is

**Recapitulation.**

to see how the idea of a fixed *list* of authoritative Christian books, *i.e.* of a canon of Christian literature, gradually arose and became general. Up to the present time we are still in the age of quotations, *i.e.* the age when we can only know the books which Christians especially esteemed by the fact that they quote from them. And in this connection we must bear one caution in mind, *viz.* that to find a book seldom quoted is not a certain proof that it was little known or little esteemed. Comparatively very few of the writings of the early Church Fathers have been preserved; and it is possible that if we had all that they wrote, we should find more quotations from some books of which at present the traces are only few. The early Church writers quoted only when a quotation occurred to them as being in place in their argument, and not for the mere sake of quoting. In the next period, however, this disadvantage no longer operates; for we then come into the age of lists, *i.e.* the age in which Christians begin to group together the books which they agree to recognise as authoritative, and to unite them into a body of literature.



CHAPTER III.  
THE SETTLEMENT OF CANON  
AND TEXT.



## CHAPTER III.

### THE SETTLEMENT OF CANON AND TEXT.

Most scholars agree that by the year 170 practically all the books of our New Testament

**2 Peter and John.** were generally known and generally regarded as authoritative; but there are two books as to which many express a great deal of doubt. One is the Second Epistle of St. Peter, the other is the Gospel of St. John. As to the former, nearly all scholars are now agreed in feeling very doubtful whether it has any right to be ascribed to St. Peter or indeed to any author of the first century. The causes for their doubt are summed up in a note at the end of Professor Sanday's *Bampton Lectures*: we are here concerned only with the external evidence, and as regards this, we find no clear and convincing sign of the book's use by any Church writer before Origen (185–253 A.D.), and he expressly mentions that the genuineness of the epistle was even then doubted.

At the very least we must admit that we cannot prove that the book was as yet received by the Church like the other books of the New Testament. The case of the Gospel of St. John is less simple and very much more important. We need not consider the very complicated question of its authorship, but merely the question, whether we can feel sure that it was known and regarded as authoritative by the year 170. There is no doubt that Irenæus (*circ.* 180–190 A.D.) accepted it. "Others," he says,<sup>1</sup> "in order that they may frustrate the gift of the Spirit . . . do not admit that form (of the Gospel) which is according to John's Gospel, in which the Lord promised that he would send the Paraclete, but reject at the same time the Gospel and the prophetic Spirit. Truly unhappy men. . . ." This occurs immediately after the passages alluded to in our previous chapter, in which he had declared that the gospel was and must be fourfold. And his testimony is the more valuable because he tells us that in his youth he had frequently conversed with Polycarp, who had been a disciple of St. John.<sup>2</sup> If we work back from Irenæus, we find that

<sup>1</sup> *Adv. Hær.* III. xi. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Euseb., *Hist. Eccl.* V. xx. 6.

Heracleon (*circ.* 170 A.D.), a leader of the Valentinian heretics, wrote a commentary on the fourth Gospel. About the same date Tatian composed a "Diatessaron" or "Harmony of Four," which is a digest of our four Gospels, beginning with the prologue of the fourth. In Justin Martyr (*circ.* 150 A.D.) we find one or two phrases which seem distinct quotations from the fourth Gospel, though he nowhere states them to be such; and he is saturated in the phraseology of the gospel, using it as if it were fully naturalised in the Church.<sup>1</sup> In Basilides (*circ.* 130 A.D.) we find at least two phrases which seem to be clear quotations from the gospel. The case as regards Polycarp (*circ.* 115 A.D.) and Ignatius (*circ.* 110 A.D.) is less clear. There is much in both of them which resembles the gospel in tone, but no unmistakable quotation can be found. It is difficult to resist the feeling that this evidence is all in the direction of proving that the gospel was well known and highly esteemed at an early date in the second century. No doubt it was less quoted than the other three because it was more difficult to comprehend and more mystical in its tone.

<sup>1</sup> I may be allowed to refer to my edition of Justin's *Apologies*, Introduction, p. xxxv.

But the evidence for its existence and use is strong, and there is really no contrary evidence. Moreover—and this is a point of some weight—it survived, in spite of its unquestionable discrepancies with the Synoptic Gospels; and the tone which Irenæus adopts towards those who slighted its authority, is one which he could hardly have taken, if there had been any general measure of doubt as to its character. Everything appears to point irresistibly to the conclusion that the fourth Gospel, whoever wrote it, had won its way to general acceptance by the year 170, and probably earlier.

We have now to consider the process by which the books of the New Testament were collected into a literature, from which

**Idea of a Canon.** all other books were excluded. So far, it must be remembered, all these books existed singly and in isolation. But it was perfectly natural that a canon or fixed list should in time be settled. The Christians would learn the idea of a canon from the Old Testament, the canon of which had been settled at the latest by 70 A.D., and probably earlier; and such an accepted list of authoritative books would be a necessity for the Christians, as, until they had made one, any-

body could make his own selection to suit his own purposes. Thus Marcion (*circ.* 144 A.D.), a leading heretic of his day, in order to support his own system, rejected not only the whole of the Old Testament, but the whole of the New except St. Luke's Gospel and ten epistles of St. Paul. This is the first attempt at a fixed list of authoritative Christian books, and we can see from its nature that the Christian Church would need, in order to meet controversy and heresy, an official list of its own, as an accepted standard of truth, to which it might appeal to justify or refute the views of theologians, orthodox or heretical. This need becomes pressing at the end of the second century, and so we are now in the age of lists.

The first list that we know is found in the "Muratorian Fragment" (found by Muratori in the Ambrosian library at Milan),  
**Muratorian** written by an unknown author  
**List.** perhaps about 200 A.D. Its first lines are lost, but they must almost certainly have named the Gospel of St. Matthew, for the opening line of the fragment which we possess refers to the Gospel of St. Mark, and in the second line the Gospel of St. Luke is given as the third Gospel. The fragment then proceeds to mention all the books of

our New Testament except the Epistles of Peter and James, which were written to Eastern churches and were perhaps not yet much known in the West, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, the omission of which is certainly strange, as it was known to and quoted by Clement of Rome in the year 95, and this list almost certainly originated in the Church at Rome. It is, however, of no use to speculate on the reasons for its omission. But we may pause to notice (1) the influence of public reading in Church and public acceptance by the Church upon the opinion as to any particular book; such and such books, we read, are sacred to the Catholic Church or are held in honour in the Catholic Church; it is, as has been said, the general sense of the Church which eventually decides what books are or are not to be received. (2) The reasons why the Shepherd of Hermas is rejected, principally because it is recent and not by an apostle. (3) The utter rejection of heretical works; "of Arsinous or Valentinus or Miltiades we receive nothing at all." These points are further evidence as to the grounds of selection which were enumerated in the last chapter.

This list, then, gives us some evidence as to the usage of the Church of Rome. We



come now to the list of Irenæus, who may be regarded not only as a link with an older age through his acquaintance with Polycarp, but also as a link between East and West, since after living as a young man in Asia and Rome he became in later years a bishop in Gaul. We have already noted the calm confidence with which he states as a commonly accepted view that there are four Gospels and no more and no less. Besides these he regards as Scripture the Acts, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, Revelation, and all St. Paul's Epistles except Philemon, which he does not quote, probably for the merely accidental reason that it was a private letter dealing with private matters and offered no particular material for quotation. The same list is found in Tertullian (who flourished in Africa about 210 A.D.) with the addition of Jude and Hebrews, and in Clement of Alexandria (same date), also with the addition of Jude. Origen, the great teacher of Alexandria (185-253 A.D.), who had also visited Palestine and Asia Minor, gives us a complete list of our present New Testament, but notes that some felt doubts about 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. We may say, then, that by about the year 300 the only books as to

Other Lists.  
"Holy  
Writ."

which any doubt still existed whether they should be received as authoritative or not, are James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation. The others are universally accepted, but these are still subject to rejection or doubt in certain places. In the next age these books win their way to universal or almost universal acceptance. But, before we see how that took place, two further points which bear on the settlement of the canon have to be noticed :—(1) The writers of the second and third centuries tend to attach an increasing value and sanctity to the books which they receive. Thus Melito (*circ.* 180 A.D.) speaks of “old books” and “books of the Old Covenant,” as if he had definitely in mind certain books of the New Covenant.<sup>1</sup> Dionysius of Corinth, at about the same date, speaks still more unequivocally; “it is not strange that certain have seized upon the Dominical Scriptures to deal dishonestly with them, since they have even plotted against those writings that are not such.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The references are given in Stanton, *op. cit.* i. pp. 140 ff.

<sup>2</sup> A passage which, as Professor Stanton points out (*loc. cit.*), reveals “the fact that the guardianship in their integrity and purity of the Scriptures of the New Covenant had already become, and was recognised as being, a serious duty for the Church.”

Theophilus of Antioch, at the same date, quotes St. John as inspired, St. Matthew as Holy Scripture, and 1 Timothy as "the Divine Word."<sup>1</sup> Irenæus considers the apostolic writings to be Scripture, entrusted to the care of the Church; "true knowledge is the teaching of the apostles and the ancient system of the Church, and the sign of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, to whom the apostles gave over the Church which is in each single place, [and] the fullest use of the Scriptures which have reached us in [careful] custody without corruption, consenting neither to addition nor to subtraction, and the text without corruption, and the legitimate and diligent explanation according to the Scriptures without peril and without blasphemy, and the chief duty of love."<sup>2</sup> Similar phrases could be cited from other authors. (2) The fringe of other writings no longer now in the New Testament is by the year 300 practically eliminated. Of such books the most important had been ( $\alpha$ ) the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which was

<sup>1</sup> See Stanton, *loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> The passage, the text and meaning of which are not always quite clear, is quoted in Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament*, p. 153.

once regarded as of primary importance in Palestine. This gospel, which probably had affinities to our St. Matthew, was never received into general use. It was written in Hebrew, and seems never to have been translated into Greek; and by the time of Jerome (346-420 A.D.) it had sunk so much out of notice that he only heard of it at all in Syria, and even there it was apparently almost forgotten. (b) The Gospel according to the Egyptians; this never had more than a local reputation, and was definitely rejected by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. (c) Tatian's Diatessaron, which was for some time used in further Syria, especially at Edessa, in place of any of the four Gospels; but it also in time gave way to them. (d) The so-called Epistle of Barnabas, which had a vogue for a time at Alexandria. (e) The Protevangelium, which never had any authority beyond the Eastern Churches.

Thus by the year 300 we may say that no book was anywhere regarded as equal in authority to any of the books of our New Testament. But, as has been seen, seven of the books were still regarded by some people and in some places as of dubious authority. Some people

**Fourth  
Century  
Lists.**

in the Christian Church for one reason or another had not yet made up their minds to accept them as part of their recognised list of authoritative books. In the next hundred years the question as to these seems to have been settled. Eusebius (265–340 A.D.) tells us frankly that these seven books were disputed by some; but his own use shows us what his opinion with regard to some of them was.<sup>1</sup> He quotes the Epistle of St. James as Scripture, and Hebrews as by St. Paul. But he is in two minds as to Revelation, and gives no indications of his view upon the other four, *viz.* 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. The lists of Athanasius (367 A.D.) and Epiphanius (died 403 A.D.) give us our complete New Testament, those of Cyril of Jerusalem (*circ.* 348 A.D.) and Gregory of Nazianzus (died 391 A.D.) give us the same with the omission of Revelation. These five witnesses are all from the Eastern half of the Church, and their agreement is almost complete. In the West the matter was settled by Jerome (346–420 A.D.), who undertook a revision of the Latin translation of the New Testament. This edition

<sup>1</sup> The passages may be found quoted in Gregory, *op. cit.* pp. 256 ff.

is the Latin Vulgate, which became the authoritative version of the Western Church for centuries, and is the basis of the version still used by the Roman Church. This comprises the whole of our New Testament; and thus it agreed with the fullest Eastern list, though doubts as to Revelation seem still to have lingered here and there in the East. Nevertheless we may say that by the year 400 the canon of the New Testament is finally closed.

In the historical process thus completed two points of special importance are to be noted: (1) That throughout the **Summary.** whole time no other gospels were ever serious rivals to the four which stand in our New Testament. Here and there a church might prefer the Gospel according to the Hebrews or Tatian's Diatessaron or some other book, but these uses were only local eccentricities. So far as the general body of the Church is concerned, our four Gospels were always supreme and alone in their supremacy. (2) The settlement of the canon was never a matter upon which any synodical or conciliar declaration of the universal Church adjudicated. The decision was made by the general feeling of the Christian Church. In

the first place, each Church made its own choice of books to be read at its services; gradually some books were more frequently copied and so became more widely known than others, some books were more often quoted or more highly esteemed than others, and when the time came for lists to be made, most of the work had been already done. The opinion of individual scholars like Origen, Athanasius, Jerome, would be of weight in the question of the few books that were at all doubted; but apart from this the lists of all Church writers agree, because they were simply enumerating the books which the Church had already accepted as authoritative. Throughout the whole process, it is the gradual influence of public opinion in the Church that directs the selection of some books and the rejection of others, and to it we owe our canon of the New Testament. At the same time we shall do well to remember that very few Church writers, not even one of such unimpeachable orthodoxy as St. Augustine, thought it incumbent on them to regard every book of the New Testament as of equal authority and value. The same was the case with the leaders of the Reformation. Erasmus

had doubts as to Hebrews, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation; Luther disparaged Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation; and Calvin expressed a dislike for James, Jude, and 2 Peter. It was only a later and more wooden age that bade us esteem every book or even every letter in the New Testament equally.

The history of the canon can be now completed in a few words. The Council of Trent in 1546 settled the Vulgate **Later History of the Canon.** version<sup>1</sup> as the authorised canon and text for the Roman Catholic world. Our own Thirty-nine Articles give the same list of the New Testament, which was also accepted by the Westminster Assembly of 1643 and in the Swiss Declaration of Faith of 1675. Thus we may say that Western Christendom has an agreed New Testament canon.<sup>2</sup> But no canon has ever been agreed upon by the whole Catholic Church, whether officially or even practically; thus to this day<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Of the Old as well as the New Testament, thus including the Apocryphal or "Deutero-canonical" books in the Old Testament.

<sup>2</sup> Though by no means an agreed text. The Vulgate version differs materially from our Authorised Version. And there are other versions also.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gregory, *op. cit.* pp. 290 ff.



the Syrian Church makes practically no use of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, or Revelation, and in the Greek Church no lesson is read from Revelation. Such exceptions, though we may treat them as merely curious, may at least serve to remind us that our New Testament canon is the work of public opinion. The New Testament is not a book but a collection of books; some were universally accepted by Christendom from the first, some at a later date, some are not even yet universally accepted in practice. The work of "New Testament criticism" is to study them individually, to discuss their authorship, date, and characteristics, to compare or contrast them with each other as to style, contents, and value; and such work is free and has always been free to the Christian student. New Testament criticism is no new thing; it is nearly as old as the Church, and a great deal older than the New Testament canon.

It has been said in the previous chapter that the knowledge of the Christian books was spread by the diffusion of  
 Copying  
 and text. copies; and it was not until these had been widely diffused that the judgment of the Church in general could

exercise itself in the choice, of which the canon is the outcome. There was every facility under the Roman Empire for such diffusion; communication was easy and travelling general. And, indeed, copying was the only means by which the books could have hoped to be long preserved. The original documents were written on papyrus rolls; and papyrus is very fragile and quickly wears out. Thus, when once a copy of a book had been made, the original was probably in time lost or broken up. We must remember, however, that copying in the early Christian ages meant something different from what it means now. It was not the sort of work that almost anybody could do; it required skill and education, and really good copyists were rare. In Cicero's time they were mainly Greek slaves, employed by some rich lover of literature; and though under the early Roman Empire there was a regular trade of book-copying in connection with the great book-selling firms, yet probably the services of a professional copyist were still difficult and expensive to procure. There may have been, there probably were, such people among the Christians; and a rich Christian would, no

doubt, sometimes pay for the services of a copyist to transcribe a Christian book.<sup>1</sup> But very often the work of copying among the Christians must have been done by an amateur, who might make mistakes, especially in copying the Greek handwriting of the age, which had neither stops nor divisions between the words. Moreover, it must be remembered that almost any copyist of that time would be disposed to exercise some of the functions of an editor; he might alter the language to make it clearer or more fluent, he might insert explanations of passages that seemed difficult; if he had knowledge of other pieces of Christian tradition, he might add them in his copy in what seemed to him a suitable place; or he might change the language under the influence of the liturgical formulæ in common use in the Church. Thus a certain amount of change in the text of Christian documents would be bound to arise through repeated copying, and we can be certain that

<sup>1</sup> As was done (*cf.* Euseb., *Hist. Eccl.* VI. xxiii. 2) by Ambrosius, who supplied Origen with scribes and shorthand writers. And we also hear (*ib.* VI. xxxii. 3) that Pamphilus collected the works of Origen and other Church writers into a library. There was probably much skilled activity among the Christians of the third and fourth centuries; and there must have been some, though no doubt less, earlier.

many a phrase or passage in our New Testament has been modified in transcription. But at the same time it is a mistake to exaggerate either the amount or the importance of such alterations ; it is quite clear that change was not made wantonly. The Church became more and more jealous to keep its records free from groundless interpolation ; and, although in some places details historically unauthentic may have crept in, and in many places the language may have been altered, yet in the main the New Testament books are the faithful record of the Church's tradition, and the general picture which they give is a credible account of what the Christian Church accepted as authentic.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A comparison between the canonical books and those rejected shows that in nearly all cases the judgment of the Christian Church worked on sane and sensible lines and did not encourage wanton fiction. It is worth while to compare the canonical Gospels with such stories as we find in the so-called *First Gospel of the Infancy*, where, e.g., we read that Jesus and other boys playing together make clay figures of animals, which Jesus causes to walk ; that Jesus miraculously widens or contracts the gates, milk-pails, sieves or boxes not properly made by Joseph ; that when Jesus was threatened with a whipping by his schoolmaster for refusing to tell his letters, the master's hand withered and he died ; or in the so-called *Gospel of Nicodemus* where we have an elaborate description of the scene in hell after the Crucifixion, of Christ's arrival at hell-gates and the confusion consequent thereon, of a quarrel between Beelzebub

It is also worth remarking in this connection that in those days, books, especially books belonging to a sect that was, like the Christians, liable to unexpected persecution, were not so easily preserved as they are now. A piece might be torn off a book by accident or violence; and the next scribe who tried to copy the book might make an attempt to supply the gap. Or a fragment of one document might be combined with another document to form one book. Such facts as these may help to explain how divergent texts of the New Testament came into being. All copyists would not make the same mistakes or alterations in copying the same book. And part of the work of New Testament scholars is, by comparison of different MSS., to establish as nearly as possible what was the original text. The best results of such work are seen at present in Westcott and Hort's edition of the New Testament in Greek. In this we may say that we have in the main an assured text, *i.e.* the best reproduction of what the Church of the first and Satan, of the scene in heaven when Christ takes Adam and the saints with him, and they meet Enoch and Elijah and the blessed thief. All is such obvious fiction; pious fiction, if we like; but what a difference from the canonical narratives!

three centuries was ready to accept. The points still under dispute are of interest to the scholar, but to ordinary Christian readers it will make small difference which view be adopted in regard to these points.

Two important passages may be cited to illustrate some of the chances of primitive copying, which we have been considering. (1) St. Mark xvi. 9–20. There are many reasons<sup>1</sup> for doubting whether this is the original ending with which St. Mark concluded his Gospel. The probability is that the original conclusion was somehow destroyed, and that these verses were added by a later writer, either from personal knowledge or by compilation from the other Gospels. This is not to say that the substituted ending is untrue; that is an entirely different matter; and all that is here argued is that it does not seem to be the authentic work of St. Mark. (2) St. John vii. 53–viii. 11, the story of the woman taken in adultery. Here again there are reasons<sup>2</sup> for

<sup>1</sup> Partly based on internal characteristics, style, etc., of the verses; partly based on external evidence, *e.g.* that of the Armenian MS. found by Conybeare, in which these verses are marked as by Aristion. See Swete's edition of the Gospel, *Introduction*.

<sup>2</sup> External—its omission by nearly all the oldest Greek

doubting if this passage is part of the original Gospel and not rather an insertion of a later writer. But at the same time the whole character of the story stamps it as a piece of genuine tradition. These two passages are long and important; shorter passages which are of similar character might also be quoted. But enough has been said to elucidate the point with which we have been concerned.

MSS., and in many versions, etc. ; and internal—its language and style. See Westcott's edition of the Gospel, *ad loc.*





CHAPTER IV.  
CANON AND INSPIRATION.



## CHAPTER IV.

### CANON AND INSPIRATION.

THE process by which the New Testament reached its present form has been summarily traced ; and it must be obvious that **Results.** the old theory to which most of us **Literary** were brought up, cannot be made **Honesty.** to square with the history. That theory regarded the Gospels as having, to all intents and purposes, the fidelity of phonographic and photographic records, and the rest of the New Testament as being the direct utterance of the Holy Spirit, every word of which was equally authoritative and of universally literal application. And it is unquestionably a genuine shock, a real cause of disquiet and alarm, to be forced to realise what a very large human element there is in the process by which the New Testament arose, and to learn that the problem of the authority of the New Testament cannot be settled out of hand by an assertion of its verbal accuracy

and infallibility. To some extent, of course, it is reassuring to know that, with the possible exception of 2 Peter, all the books of the New Testament may with great confidence be dated in the first century, *i.e.* they are as nearly contemporary literature as under the circumstances could be expected, and that they were accepted by the Church at a time when the tradition was so fresh and living that any very serious error could have been detected. To some extent, too, it is comforting to know that the books, however they came into their present form, were received in their present form by the Church as faithful records of that which Christendom had been taught from the beginning to believe. It will probably also be some relief to know that, whatever may be the authorship of any book or part of a book, no charge of literary dishonesty can fairly or justly be brought against the books, even if they are not by the apostles in whose names they are severally written. The idea of a man's copyright in his own writings is quite modern; it has been fostered by the ease with which books are now reproduced and circulated, and by a growing sense that a man is responsible only for what he himself writes or says. But in

the early Christian centuries men's ideas on this subject were very much the same as in Old Testament times. The writer of a new psalm, the promulgator of a new law, the speaker or recorder of a new prophecy had among the Jews no scruple in attaching his psalm, his law, his prophecy to the recognised or traditional writings of David or Moses or Isaiah, as the case might be. David was the typical psalmist, Moses the typical legislator, Isaiah or some other great name the typical prophet; their spirit was supposed to live on in their successors; and a man would add his production to their writings without any sense that he was doing them an injustice, nor would any one dream of accusing him of dishonesty for the action. This process of compilation was no doubt assisted by the fact that material on which to write was not so common or so easy to procure as it is now, and also by the disturbances of Jewish history, in consequence of which the Jewish sacred books were in many cases existing only in fragments, when attempts were made to collect them.<sup>1</sup> But, making all allowance

<sup>1</sup> Such collections were no doubt made at earlier dates (*cf.* Prov. xxv. 1). But the great time of such activity must have been after the Captivity.

for these accidental circumstances, we must admit that nobody was likely to trouble to inquire very carefully what evidence there was that such and such a chapter or section was by the author whose name appeared at the head of the roll. It was enough that it seemed to embody his spirit. And the same notion lasted into Christian times. If, for instance, as many scholars believe, it is true that the Pastoral Epistles contain only fragments from the pen of St. Paul, while the rest is the production of a later writer, who has compiled the fragments together with work of his own, nobody at that time would consider this compiler dishonest for producing the whole as the work of St. Paul; the epistles were supposed to continue and develop St. Paul's ideas, and therefore, according to the literary standards of the day,<sup>1</sup> might be joined to his authentic writings without failure of honesty. Or, if we consider the Gospels, let us suppose that an evangelist,

<sup>1</sup> Though it seems very probable that the Christian Church would not have approved of "an attempt seriously to mould public opinion and affect Church teaching under a false assumption of apostolic authority" (Ramsay in *Expositor*, July 1911). The book would have to be Pauline, if it was to be accepted as St. Paul's. Mere bare forgery would be condemned, if discovered.

after recording some of our Lord's words, wished to explain the idea or develop the argument which, in his view, our Lord intended, he would not scruple to add his own exposition as if it were part of the original words. In his mind it was merely the natural outcome of those words and therefore could honestly be added to them. It must be remembered also, in this connection, that the evangelists do not profess to be giving biographies of our Lord's life. They are giving, as St. Mark says, "the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God," or, as St. Luke puts it, "a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us." They are recording the impression which Jesus Christ made on His contemporaries and followers, with the grounds for this impression, as found in His life and teaching. They are preaching by history; and their object is to reproduce the right impression of Christ's Person and not in all cases merely the details of His life. This consideration especially affects the fourth Gospel. There are scholars who suggest that most of that Gospel is fictitious, and that the details of our Lord's life as presented in it are largely symbolical imagery. This view seems to me

**The  
Fourth  
Gospel.**

to be an extravagance of ingenious criticism. But, even if it were in any measure true, it would provide no ground for an accusation against the author of dishonesty. His purpose was that his readers might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God"; he wished, in other words, to reproduce on them the impression which Christ's personality made on him; and for that purpose his method, though not such as we should adopt nowadays without explanation, would be quite in accordance with the canons of his own time on literary truth. His book is a perfectly honest book, if in it he has tried to give us his real impression without attempting to delude himself or us. Similarly, with regard to the discourses attributed to our Lord in the fourth Gospel, it may be true—I do not say dogmatically that it is true—that our Lord's teaching was not of this character, but was more like that which we find in the Synoptists, *viz.* teaching by parables and short sayings; in which case it is reasonable to infer that the author of the fourth Gospel has often expanded such parables and aphorisms into a continuous discourse by adding his own reflections upon it. But there is in this no dishonesty, if



there is no dishonesty of purpose. He gives us what he thinks that our Lord meant ; if he is honest in trying to reproduce his own impression, there can be no dishonesty in the method by which he tries to effect that object.

But, when all this is said, we are still inclined to ask at least two questions : (1) As regards the Gospels in particular, allowing its full weight to what has just been argued, yet we want to know how far they are true. What ground have we for believing that the authors were honest or were not mistaken ? They record their own impressions ; have we any cause to believe that their impressions were right, and that they are honest in giving their grounds for them ? (2) As regards the New Testament in general, in what sense can we say that it is inspired ? If, as has been pointed out, its books are in some cases compiled from various sources, and the human element has entered largely into their production and reproduction, the problem of their inspiration seems to be indefinitely complicated. We are no longer to think of one author writing at the direct dictation of the Holy Spirit. We have to think of a continuous tradition passed on orally, then written down piecemeal, then put

together into books ; or we have to think of epistles copied and recopied, not always with verbal accuracy, or compiled and united by later hands. And, unless we believe each one of these oral transmitters of tradition, these writers, compilers, copyists, to have been Divinely inspired, in what sense can we say that the product of this process is inspired? In what degree can we attribute authority to the New Testament as the Word of God?

We may here deal with the second of these questions, reserving the first for our last chapter.

The meaning of Inspiration is a large question, which concerns both Testaments, and can only be summarily treated here ; but the question has been so fully discussed of late years that the main outlines of its answer are sufficient for our present purpose. In the first place, then, we must realise that, although the early Christians certainly attributed inspiration of some, perhaps of a special, sort to the New Testament books, yet they did not admit books into the canon and reject others because they held the former to be specially inspired and the latter not to be so. Their grounds of selection were, as we have seen, because a

book was written or vouched for by an apostle, because it was used in an important church, or because it corresponded with the Church's traditional doctrine. In short, it was mainly a question of authority. It was a conceivable hypothesis that one book might be as inspired as another and yet not possess the same authority as a standard of Christian truth, simply because it was not written by a person who had been an eye-witness, or a contemporary or disciple of eye-witnesses, of the events narrated. The line between the canonical and uncanonical books was taken to run along the line between the apostolic and sub-apostolic periods; and the distinction between these periods was not taken as one between a period of inspiration and a period when inspiration had ceased, but as one between a period of more or less contemporary evidence and a period of later reflection. Both periods are periods of Christian inspiration, like every other period in the history of the Christian Church. But we mark off the apostolic period and call its literature canonical and ascribe to it a special authority, because the literature of that period was written by men who had the chances of best knowing the truth, because they were nearer to the

original authorities, *i.e.* Christ and His apostles.<sup>1</sup>

Thus we are quite within our rights in saying that there is and can be only one *kind* of inspiration in the world, *viz.* the inspiration of God. The inspiration of the New Testament is of the same *kind* as that which we find in the words and writings of any holy soul which has lived in touch with God and sought to know and to express His Will. Inspiration means the giving by God to men of that wisdom which, "from generation to generation passing into holy souls, maketh men friends of God and prophets."<sup>2</sup> There are and must be differences in *degree* of inspiration between men; one man will see deeper into God's counsels than another. All prophets are not equally inspired; the inspiration of Isaiah is of a higher degree than that of Obadiah, that of the book of Job higher than that of the book of Ecclesiastes.

<sup>1</sup> When the separation has been completed, we can look back and see that the total result is, as a matter of fact, the separation of a literature inspired to a unique degree from all other literature; this will be discussed later. But at present we are only concerned with the actual historical grounds upon which the separation was originally made.

<sup>2</sup> Wisdom vii. 27.

The same book is not in every passage written at the same level; we can note the spiritual difference between different parts of Ezekiel, or of St. Paul, or between one Psalm and another. But all inspiration, whatever its degree, is of God. One man sees only a little or understands only a little of God's Will; other men see or understand more; Jesus Christ saw and understood all. Jesus Christ alone was fully inspired; and other men would be the first to confess that their inspiration was not perfect, for they were not perfectly at one with God. But any man, woman, or child, who has any feeling for God and any knowledge of God and any communion with God, is in that measure inspired by God. And it is for us, in so far and only in so far as we have any measure of God's Spirit, to judge of the inspiration of others. Spiritual things can only be spiritually discerned; in this matter deep calls to deep. The Spirit of God in others calls to the Spirit of God in us. And by the light of that Spirit alone can we recognise the same Spirit, wherever it is found.

Our first point, then, is that all inspiration is and can only be of one *kind*, though there may be diversities of *degree*. The argument which equates the inspiration of the New

Testament with, for example, Plato or Browning, is often extravagantly pressed; it is scarcely reasonable to read the same height and depth of God-consciousness in these writers as is found in the New Testament writers, and the argument is often used with the *arrière pensée* that by making such a comparison, the belief in the inspiration of the New Testament is diminished, whereas it is rather the fact that the belief in the inspiration of these other writers is thereby raised. But, if used rationally and quite honestly, the argument is irrefutable that the inspiration of St. Paul, of Isaiah, of Browning, of Plato, of any of us who tries to live in conscious communion with God, is the same and must be the same in kind, however vast the differences of degree; for it can only come from God and can only be the operation of the Holy Spirit.

How then, secondly, does this inspiration work? The traditional view was that it worked by superseding human faculties, so that the inspired man for the time being spoke with the infallibility of God. But, if our view of inspiration be right, it follows that nobody can be infallible as God is, unless he can hear

**Method  
of In-  
spiration.**

quite clearly and understand quite perfectly the voice of God; to do that he must be perfectly and permanently at one with God; and nobody has ever been so, except Jesus Christ. The traditional theory of inspiration therefore detracts from the unique honour of our Lord. And it also detracts from the dignity of the human soul; for it makes inspiration a mechanical supersession of human faculties by the coercion of the Divine Spirit, and not the free communion of human spirit with Divine, the voluntary union of a fellow-worker with his God. The true view is the Scriptural view, that the Spirit of God is a guide, and that man is free to follow His leading. An inspired man remains a man and does not become a machine. His human faculties are not superseded, but directed and strengthened by the Divine Spirit, and they still remain human faculties, though raised to a higher power. In this as in every religious act there is the Divine side and there is the human side. God teaches, but man has to learn and to understand; and man must do so freely, for God forces His teaching on nobody. This being so, it follows that, whilst a man remains human, he remains

liable to error and mistake. Sin and ignorance may hinder, nay, since he is man, must hinder him from hearing and understanding God's voice perfectly. Therefore a man, a Church, a book, the Bible, may be inspired and yet make mistakes. It must be so, for the authors of the Bible were men, inspired, but yet men. That it is so we can see at once, when we read the Bible frankly and honestly, without the desire to support a preconceived theory at the expense of truth; for the Bible contains errors and contradictions, which cannot be squarely explained, unless we refuse either to consider it as inspired, or to believe that inspiration means infallibility. The second is the preferable alternative.

Why then do we consider the New Testament to be inspired? The question of its truth is for the present reserved; but, assuming it for the present to be on the whole a true and honest record, though it contains mistakes on points of detail at the least, why do we call it the "Word of God"? The answer to this question is far more easy to perceive than to formulate with the strength and precision with which one ought

Inspira-  
tion of  
the New  
Testament.



to speak. But in the first place at any rate let us assert without the smallest tinge of doubt, as an absolutely certain fact, that the New Testament itself<sup>1</sup> is the evidence of its own inspiration. Its value is intrinsic. It is different from all other books; it is a more direct expression of the consciousness of God than any other book. It is the most original book in the world in this sense, that it comes out of a profounder depth of thought than any other book. Nowhere else do we find such signs that the writers were men who lived in constant touch with God, in the constant sense of the Divine Presence, in the constant conviction that the world is God's, and not man's nor the devil's. Why this should be so we cannot explain except by the belief that "the outpouring of the Holy Spirit" is a tremendous reality. On any opposite hypothesis the character of the New Testament is an inexplicable enigma. The writers may have made mistakes, their memories may be here and there at fault, they may not always have interpreted Christ quite aright. But, whatever their human shortcomings—and who could at once enter,

<sup>1</sup> The same could be said of the Old Testament. But I am dealing here only with the New Testament.

who indeed has yet entered, into the full understanding of Christ?—yet they were men who were near to God, in whom God's Spirit dwelt abundantly, to whom and through whom God spoke. Nobody can prove this contention by logical argument. As has been said, spiritual things can only be spiritually discerned, and it is only by the guidance of God's Spirit in our own souls that we can discern the workings of the same Spirit in the New Testament or anywhere else. Part of the Christian's growth in grace is a growth in the power of better appreciating the Divine inspiration of the New Testament; and even a lifetime of growth in holiness still leaves a man far from seeing in its pages all the beauties that there are to see. No study, therefore, of the New Testament can be really a means of grace except to him who engages and perseveres in it in the spirit of prayer. But to him who does so, who, humbled yet illuminated by God's Spirit, comes to the reading of its pages, however modest may yet be his faculties of spiritual apprehension, the New Testament tells its own story. He may find a mistake here, a misunderstanding there, an exaggeration or contradiction elsewhere; but through all

he knows that he is finding God, that God spoke to the authors, and that they heard Him and tried to tell what they heard. He knows that St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, spoke "in the Lord"; he knows that the Evangelists wrote under the guidance of the Spirit, and that, even if they made mistakes in detail, the general impression of Jesus Christ which they felt and tried to express, was that which they had gathered under that Divine guidance; and in such a matter there can be no mistake of really vital import. God's inspiration may not have made them know science or history beyond possibility of error or forgetfulness; it cannot have made them know even God Himself perfectly; the perfect knowledge of God can only be gained when men are themselves perfected. But God's inspiration cannot have failed to teach them something at least of the right way to recognise God; and when they tell us that in Jesus Christ they saw God, that in Jesus Christ's face they saw "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God," that in Jesus Christ they saw the glory of the Word of God made flesh, "the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," then their words deserve respect, as

the utterance of men to whom, in whom, through whom, God's Spirit was speaking.

And, secondly, the inspiration of the New Testament is attested by the Church. If we

**Witness  
of the  
Church.**

believe that the Church, whatever may have been its mistakes, is yet under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, we must believe that it cannot have been totally mistaken in the evidential basis of its whole Creed. The New Testament is not only written by inspired men; it is also the authoritative documents of an inspired society, the documentary foundation of its faith and life. The whole force of this consideration depends, of course, upon our ability to believe in the Holy Spirit within the Church. But, unless we hold that belief, Church and New Testament alike are left in a very precarious position, for they are witnesses whose testimonies cannot really be put asunder. But, if we believe that the Church is God's Church, then the belief in the Holy Spirit directing the Church is a guarantee to us of the belief in the same Spirit animating the New Testament. The process by which the New Testament reached its present form is no argument whatsoever against the belief in its inspiration, if we

believe in the providence of God watching over His Church, and in His Spirit inspiring it.

The intrinsic quality of the New Testament, the Divine government of the Church which

**Summary.** wrote and accepted that New Testament, both these facts speak to the same effect; but both are facts which can only be accepted by such as have the witness of God's Spirit in themselves. There is no possibility of inducing any one to believe in the inspiration of the New Testament, who is not in some measure, however small, himself inspired. But God's Spirit ranges widely, and the number of those who are taught of God is known to God alone. And we shall find more than we expect to agree with us when we say that, though there may be mistakes in the New Testament, yet there is no mistake as to the teacher of the fundamental truths of which it speaks. It is and can only be God's Spirit. And there is no mistake as to the central truth which He teaches; it is the truth that the God, "who in times past spake in sundry parts and by divers manners to the fathers in the prophets, has at the end of these days spoken to us in a Son, whom He made heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds."



CHAPTER V.  
CHURCH AND NEW TESTAMENT.





## CHAPTER V.

### CHURCH AND NEW TESTAMENT.

WE now pass to the question how far the New Testament is to be considered true, and what authority we are to ascribe to it as a standard of truth. This question mainly concerns the Gospels and the Acts, but our opinion in this matter with regard to them must necessarily react upon our opinion with regard to the other books.

We have found that the process by which the books of the New Testament were written, and, being written, were eventually canonised, was throughout, though **Recapitulation.** Divinely inspired, yet human in its method. No direct Divine voice dictated a book, nor pronounced it canonical. The writers used sources, traditional or written, for their works; in some cases later compilers put smaller records together to form a larger volume; copyists produced copies which differed in some respects from the originals.

Again, the books in their present form are not always by their reputed authors, and even the early Church had doubts as to the authorship of some. It follows, therefore, that we must allow that there was room for mistakes in this process. Details could be mistaken or misreported. Phrases have been expanded, altered, explained. We cannot always be sure that what is stated to have been said and done by our Lord was always exactly so said and done.<sup>1</sup> It is also undeniable that a harmony of the four Gospels is impossible. There are contradictions between the Gospels which cannot be explained away; contradictions on points of fact, where one version must be wrong, if the other is right, *e.g.* in the accounts of the Last Supper, as to which the day of its occurrence is variously stated, or in the accounts of the Resurrection and Ascension, which differ in many details. To harmonise these by any honest exegesis is impossible. Again, we have seen that the Gospels were written by Christians in order to convince others of their own belief in Jesus Christ; and this is exactly the sort of state-

<sup>1</sup> This sentence is, I believe, a quotation from Stanton's *Gospels as Historical Documents*, but I have not been able to find the reference.

ment which a superficial student may at once take to be an argument against the credibility of the Gospels. If the Gospels are not unbiased statements of fact,<sup>1</sup> it is natural, though we shall endeavour to show it to be premature, to infer that they are not to be credited.

In the face of such unquestionable facts it behoves us to consider carefully our grounds for still believing the New Testament to be on the whole a true record. And these main grounds are perhaps four in number :—

(1) We must allow that there are contradictions in the Gospel versions of our Lord's life; but these are almost wholly on matters of detail. The broad character of our Lord's teaching, the broad line of the events of His life, are the same throughout. Whatever mistakes there may be in detail, the picture of Jesus Christ in the Synoptists, in St. John, in St. Paul, and in the Church's Creed, is harmonious; and it is its own guarantee. Nobody could have invented such a picture. St. John no doubt emphasises more fully one side of our

Picture  
of Jesus  
Christ.

<sup>1</sup> I wonder if there ever has been or could be, outside abstract matters, such a thing as an "unbiased statement of fact"; and whether it would be of any human value, if it did exist.

Lord's personality and teaching than do the other evangelists. But there is no vital difference in the various pictures. They are all consistent with one another. It is the same Person who walks and talks and acts. And that Person is unique. This is perhaps the strongest of all arguments for the truthfulness of the records. No human imagination could have devised such a person as Jesus Christ. It must be true, because it is beyond human faculties of romance. The assent of our own personal impression is no doubt needed to fix this conviction indelibly on our souls; and such an assent must be the fruit of personal experience and study and devotion. But even an æsthetic appreciation of the uniqueness of our Lord's personality has its value; and such an appreciation can be given by any one with an eye for character.

(2) We must allow that the evangelists wrote as Christians. But that does not convict them, or the Church which canonised their writings, of being dishonest or untruthful. The question to ask is, "Were they honest?" And to this none but an affirmative answer is conceivable. Their honesty is shown, firstly, by the fact that they allowed the discrepancies

Honesty  
of the  
Christian  
Church.

in the records to remain. Dishonest men would have seen to it that their romance hung together consistently in every detail. Honest men would, as our Gospels do, preserve whatever seemed to be stated on good authority, secure that the general truth would be visible through inconsistencies of detail. Again, the honesty of the evangelists and the Church is attested by their work and sufferings for the faith in the facts which the Gospels recorded. The earliest apostles were not mere crazy fanatics. Some, like St. Paul, were thoroughly well educated. Others belonged to the artisan or trading class, *i.e.* to that class which in all ages is most reluctant to believe anything unusual.<sup>1</sup> St. Paul was the coming man of Judaism; and he threw over the career opening out to him for the sake of the faith in Christ. Nor was he in any way an isolated exception; indeed his experience became the possible experience of all Christians, and the actual experience of very many, as soon as persecution

<sup>1</sup> I believe it is Mr. G. K. Chesterton who says that, if a latter-day prophet were to set out in the morning to effect conversions to his gospel in London, he might have converted half a dozen or more members of the "higher orders" by lunch-time; but that he would have to be closeted with a coal-heaver for very long before he could make an impression upon him; and even at the end of the interview he would not be entirely assured that his work had not been wasted.

of Christianity became fashionable. It did not pay to be a Christian, and in many cases it meant the ruin of all worldly prospects. Dishonest men are not so blind to their immediate interests as to become unworldly in the defence of a faith which they do not believe to be true. The early Christian Church may more reasonably be accused of anything in the world rather than of dishonesty. The evangelists wrote as Christians to convince. But they give us the facts which had convinced them, and we cannot but believe that they give them honestly as far as they knew them and understood them.

(3) But, if the writers of the New Testament books, and the Church which accepted their writings, were honest, had they  
 their writings, were honest, had they  
 the means of knowing the truth?  
**Date of Christian Tradition.** The books are based on tradition; have we any grounds for believing that the tradition had a chance of being true? This is partly a question of authorship; we cannot deny that a direct personal follower of Christ, or one who had derived his information from such an one, would have been more likely to know the facts. But it is still more a question of date; there is no reason why others, besides our Lord's own

disciples, should not have learnt the truth. Thus the question of authorship is of minor importance, compared to the question, when the records of Christ's life arose. From what age does the tradition recorded in the Gospels proceed? Whoever wrote the Gospels as they now stand, and whensoever and howsoever they were so composed, the fundamental question is, "From what date does the tradition come, which was written down, which is incorporated in our Gospels? Is it fairly contemporary or is it not?" To this question the answer, which certainly most scholars would give, is that "the great mass of the narrative in the first three Gospels took its shape before the destruction of Jerusalem, *i.e.* within less than forty years of the events."<sup>1</sup> That catastrophe produced such a complete change in the whole situation of Palestine and Jerusalem, that it would be almost or quite impossible for a tradition dating from after that event not to reveal clear traces of its late origin. And there can be little doubt that the historical environment as seen in the Gospels is mostly anterior to that date. This conclusion, which has long

<sup>1</sup> Sanday, *Bampton Lectures*, pp. 283 ff. The whole section should be read.

been held by conservative critics, is winning increasing adherence among those who used to doubt it, and the whole tendency of the sanest scholarship leans towards its acceptance.<sup>1</sup> We are therefore on safe grounds in concluding that the general outline of Christian tradition, being so nearly contemporary with the events, had every chance of being true. We have seen that it was recorded by honest men, who would not willingly falsify facts, though they might make errors in detail or might interpret happenings according to the ideas of their time in a different way from that in which a modern writer would describe them. And we can see for ourselves that the recorded picture of Jesus Christ possesses in itself signs, unquestionable to any candid mind, of being genuine. These are surely sufficient grounds for asserting the general credibility and truthfulness of the Gospels;<sup>2</sup> and with them

<sup>1</sup> This tendency has been mightily reinforced by the adhesion of Professor Harnack, in his book on the *Date of the Acts and Synoptic Gospels*, which was referred to on p. 38, note 3.

<sup>2</sup> Schweitzer, who is in many respects the most interesting and suggestive of modern critics of the German school, and who could certainly not be suspected of a bias towards orthodoxy, says, quite unequivocally: "when we have once made up our minds that we have not the materials for a complete life of Jesus, but only for a picture of his public ministry, it must be admitted that there are few characters



goes necessarily the case for the other books of the New Testament.

(4) To these grounds, however, a fourth of great importance may now be added, *viz.*

the agreement between the Church's

**Witness** Creed and the Gospel statements.

**of the**

**Church.**

After all, the Church is the living witness to the New Testament. The

Church dates from Jesus Christ, it was a living society, with a living tradition, and a living consciousness from the morrow of the Ascension. And the New Testament canon is the literature which the Church accepted as the authentic embodiment of its continuous tradition. That is a testimony, the strength of which cannot be denied by any one who admits the early Church to have consisted in general of sane and honest men. For in the Church we have a living evidence dating back to the very time itself in which the recorded events took place. To one who goes further and regards the Church as a Divinely-inspired society, the New Testament will appear as the literature upon which God's Providence and God's Spirit has set its seal.

of antiquity, about whom we possess so much indubitably historical information, of whom we have so many authentic discourses" (*Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 6).

We must now try to gather up our conclusions as to the extent of the authority, which we may ascribe to Church and New Testament. As has been seen, we must take and cannot help taking the witness of the two together. They are indeed not two, but one. The New Testament is a standard of truth, but it is an accepted standard, and its acceptance by the Church is part of its voucher. Similarly the teaching of the Church is the explanation of the New Testament; we cannot hope to understand the New Testament aright, except in relation to the history of the Church and to the Church's Creed. At the same time it is hard to see how, with any respect for history, we can hold any other view than that for the Christian of to-day the New Testament furnishes us with the basis of belief. We have seen, from our study of the history of the New Testament, that it cannot possibly be regarded as the source of the Christian religion. That arose in Church tradition and Church life; the New Testament came later as the historical record of the basis of that tradition and life. But the Church accepted and canonised the books of the New Testament as giving the authoritative basis of Church

**The New  
Testament  
the Basis  
of Belief.**

tradition; and thus, although the Church is the teaching body, yet it is bound to base its teaching on the New Testament and to send any who question its teaching to the New Testament, in order to see for themselves that the teaching can be verified. This is not to deny the right of the Church to develop its doctrine and to interpret it afresh to successive ages; that is a necessity for any living society, and a Church which fails to do this is in danger of intellectual petrification. But the development must be a genuine and natural development. A Christian Church has no moral right to propound new doctrines, which cannot be supported out of the New Testament, as necessary articles of faith. In so doing, it is wholly deserting the idea of the early ages of the Church, that the New Testament gave the groundwork of the Christian faith, and that Church doctrine must be naturally deducible from these records. Of course a Church has the right to make what conditions of membership it chooses, and chance the consequences; but, if it imposes conditions which are sheer additions to the groundwork of faith as found in the New Testament, it cannot be surprised if it is accused of being un-apostolic.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Un-apostolic," and therefore "un-Catholic." But the

In short, the Church has no moral authority to establish any doctrine that it pleases, as an article of faith; it may only do so along the lines of the New Testament, for the New Testament is the standard which the Church itself has accepted as its record of revealed truth. And every individual Christian has the right and even the duty to exercise his private judgment in deciding whether a doctrine is along those lines or not.

Nevertheless the exercise of mere individual private judgment upon the New Testament records, without any respect for the **Church Authority.** Church's interpretation of those records, as embodied in its Creed, is an abuse of individual liberty, and a dangerous act of intellectual license. The past ages have or ought to have an authority over us who are their heirs. The collective inspiration of a great society like the Christian Church, an inspiration that lasts through the centuries, has a claim to our allegiance which could not easily be overestimated. And those who lightly repudiate these venerable traditions, who definitely sever themselves from the wit-

term "Catholic" is so abominably misused now, that it means totally different things in different people's mouths, and very often something that it could not possibly mean.

ness of antiquity, and concede to every individual an equal right to construct his own faith out of the New Testament, without at the same time teaching him to reverence the interpretation of that New Testament which the Church has continuously handed down in creed and practice, are simply pandering to human conceit and opening the door for all the shallow and half-instructed theories of ignorance to range unrestrained. Let us observe that to deny the right of private judgment is a hopelessly futile and fatuous proceeding. Men will judge for themselves, if they are men; and men must judge for themselves, if faith is to be their own act, the operation of their own wills. But it is surely right to plead that private judgment should recognise its own limitations, and should pay to the voice of the historic Church that respect which is deserved by the inspired experience of nineteen centuries.

Let us attempt to elucidate the point, for it is important. As has been said, neither the Church nor the New Testament is infallible;<sup>1</sup> and, since we have no infallible guide

<sup>1</sup> Ideally the Church is, as the organ of the Holy Spirit. But actually, under conditions of present imperfection, truth and error coexist in the Church. Even in matters of such

to follow, it is obvious that we are under the duty of exercising free inquiry and free judgment; human faith has so much dignity in it that it cannot dispense with personal study of truth and personal experience of value. We must find out for ourselves if our faith is true, and if it answers the needs of our nature; unless we can give that testimony out of our own consciousness, our faith is still immature.

Authority  
and  
Private  
Judgment.

The Church, we may repeat, has the right to make its own conditions of membership and to teach its own interpretation of Scripture; and whatever it says deserves to be listened to with respect by everybody; so much is due to the Church's history, even from one who denies its inspiration. But the Church cannot claim, and, in spite of prejudice and misunderstanding, it does not claim to force its doctrines on any one, outside the limits of its professed members. If its doctrines commend themselves to us, we can and ought to accept them; but if we disagree with any of these doctrines, we cannot and must not play traitor to our convictions. In such a case we

importance as the exposition of the doctrine of the Atonement, it has made mistakes.

must decide for ourselves how vital our disagreement is, whether it is so fundamental as to justify us in breaking from communion with the Church.<sup>1</sup> If we decide that it is, nobody on earth has the right to blame us for following the dictates of truth as we conceive it.

But it is not always so fully recognised as it ought to be, that to break from Church

**Schism.** communion is a very extreme step, only to be justified by the most imperative reasons. It means setting up our own opinions or convictions in opposition to those of an historic society, which originated Divinely and has been Divinely preserved. It means a severance from all Christian continuity of history. There may be, as there may have been, cases where so extreme a step is legitimate and right for those who take it, where the cleavage of conviction has become so fundamental that schism is the only honest course for those who so absolutely disagree with the Church's most vital doctrines. But such cases cannot be very common, and many schisms, whether of individuals or of

<sup>1</sup> I leave entirely on one side, as too large and difficult, the separate though allied question of clerical subscription and its scope.

bodies of men, have arisen through trivial causes and from trifling disagreements. No doubt the fault in such cases has often lain on both sides; but the plain fact, apart from excuses, is that many a schism has been unjustified, and that the Church has too great a history and too august an authority to be lightly quitted for secondary causes. Private judgment has its rights, but an historic society like the Church has its rights also. It should be only in the very last resort, as the only means of remaining true to what seem absolutely primary convictions, that the rights of private judgment should be asserted in open defiance of the Church's rights to loyalty. There is no need to cite particular schisms to illustrate the point. Every schism and every refusal of communion will have to stand its trial before the bar of God and of history; and that is a suit which may last for centuries. But it is enough here to have emphasised the general principle that schism is the last and should only be the last resource of the Christian, a measure to be adopted only for the most far-reaching causes and not for a mere private fad or prejudice, for a personal preference or inclination.

Meanwhile, for those who are members of



the Church of England, it is something to realise that the glory and strength of that body is that, though numberless instances of practical bigotry and intolerance are constantly occurring, yet in theory it allows varieties of interpretation and imposes very comprehensive conditions of membership. In it we may find room for the most free inquiry and study; for all the ignorant outcry of individuals against Biblical criticism cannot affect the theoretical tolerance of the Church to all honest searchers after truth; in it we may find a reverence for Scriptural authority, such as no other body in the world can claim; and in it also we may find that continuity of belief which links us on in spirit and in truth to the venerable ages that are past. It is not averse from re-interpretation of the Christian faith in the light of new knowledge and to meet the needs of new conditions; but it insists emphatically that no reinterpretation shall be allowed which is inconsistent with the preservation of essential truth. In it we find free play given to the witness of the Church, the witness of Scripture, the witness of the individual conscience, in the full faith

that the spirit of truth, which is the Spirit of God, can enlighten us more and more to harmonise these three witnesses, so long as we follow faithfully His teachings, and love and look for the truth as it is in God and count nothing more important than this. And the day of failure for our Church will only come, if once we allow any one of these three elements to predominate at the expense of the other two, or any one to be suppressed in the interests of the other two. A Creed based on Scripture, developed on that basis by the living Church, and apprehended by the free act of faith of each individual, this is the theory which has made the Church of England what it is, this is the theory which, so long as we cling fast to it in its entirety, will still lead our Church from strength to strength.

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